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NEGRO SURVIVAL

W. MONTAGUE COBB

Negro Survival¹

When two species occupy the same territory and depend upon the same means of subsistence, each tends to supplant the other. Human beings are no exception to this rule. It matters not whether the two groups engage in actual conflict or vie with each other in the offices of brotherly love, competition for the means of subsistence is bound to go on. Even though they may interbreed and eventually fuse into a single hybrid stock, the two groups will, in the meantime, inevitably engage in a struggle for numerical supremacy.

Thus grimly begins Dr. Holmes' discussion of the chances of the Negro in the United States as a group competing for survival with the whites. The futility of attempted prophecy is conceded. The author restricts himself to the investigation of present trends in the light of "birth rates, death rates, infant mortality, immunity and susceptibility to disease, the causes and biological effects of migration, the results of race mixture and the influence of the various other forces which affect the natural increase of peoples."

Undoubtedly the present proportions of Negroes and whites in this country will not continue indefinitely and the racial struggle may work out in four ways: "we may all become black; we may all become white; whites and blacks may fuse into a hybrid stock; or we may become permanently biracial, either mingled together, or occupying different local areas."

The important issues become, the present and prospective rates of increase of Negroes and of whites and

the amount of racial interbreeding to be anticipated.

The possibility of our all becoming black escapes discussion. It is not held likely that we shall all become white or that the two groups will fuse into a hybrid stock. The American Negro, already infused with much white and Indian blood, is today essentially an inbreeding people who do not incorporate new white blood in significant quantities. Dr. Holmes does not predict any relaxation of the social and legal restrictions which now effectively cool the racial melting pot.

Contrarily, he considers that "it may happen in the future that the white and Negro races will become on the whole more widely divergent." This would be due to the failure of the mulatto group to be augmented significantly through new interracial unions and to the low birth rate of mulattoes. A birth rate low not "because their mixed parentage has affected their fertility, but because they live predominately in areas (cities) where the birth rate tends to be low in other classes of the population as well." Ultimately, "the mulatto population, so far as it escapes extinction, will probably be slowly absorbed into the blacks and very slightly into the whites, giving the blacks a somewhat lighter color and producing in time a more homogeneous race."

At the same time, attention is directed to the much cited preference of Negro men for mates lighter than themselves. "Whether the black girls are likely to be outbred by their fairer sisters, we do not yet know. If we had adequate data on the reproductivity of the two types in rural and in urban areas, I suspect that the black girl would be found to be more than holding her own."

In rates of increase, "at the present time the two races are running almost

¹ Holmes, S. J., *The Negro's Struggle for Survival: A Study in Human Ecology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937. Pp. 296.

a neck and neck race. There is a fair prospect that the blacks may soon be increasing at a faster pace . . . (and) from a consideration of the factors influencing the natural increase of the two competing races, such an eventuality seems to me distinctly possible if not probable."

Although in his preface Dr. Holmes states that he trusts the fact that he belongs to one of the contending groups in the struggle for survival has not prevented him from maintaining throughout a detached and objective attitude, we find that at the mere possibility of a rate of Negro increase greater than that of the whites, he is ready to suggest the consideration of "humane and feasible" measures for population control. "If a government should decide to regulate the relative proportions of whites and Negroes in the United States, there are various measures which might be employed to achieve this end without violating any fundamental human rights." No advice to statesmen on such measures is ventured in this volume, but the availability of the author's services may be inferred.

The seemingly alarming possibility that the Negro may soon be increasing at a faster pace than the whites, is indicated by several lines of evidence. The growth of the Negro population to its present size has been due mainly to its high birth rate. This has been sufficient to produce an increase in numbers despite an excessive mortality.

The age composition of the Negro population has steadily changed so as to favor a high birth rate. In 1890, 45.1 per cent of Negro females were in the reproductive age group, between 15 and 44 years. In 1930, this proportion had risen to 52.0 per cent. Because more births occur to Negroes than to whites in the earlier reproductive years, Negro generations succeed one another more rapidly than generations in the whites. Both these factors favor a more rapid numerical increase for the Negro.

The Negro birth rate no longer appears to be seriously retarded by the effect of the northward migrations. The agricultural South would seem likely to remain the best breeding ground, while the balance of births over deaths in the Northern cities should continue to improve as urban conditions and the Negro's adaptation to them improve.

Although the employment of contraceptive methods among Negroes in good circumstances is similar to that of comparable whites, Holmes regards the researches of Pearl as indicating that among the poorly circumstanced, the future decline in the birth rate due to contraception will be less rapid in Negroes than in whites.

The Negro outlook is further improved by the fact that the period of his greatest mortality, between 15 and 44 years, is, on the one hand, the period in which mortality is easiest reduced with modern hygiene and medical service, and on the other, the period of major reproductive activity. "With respect to the biological struggle the deaths that occur after the reproductive period are relatively unimportant."

The longest chapter in the book is on the selective action of disease among Negroes and whites, but this might well have formed the subject of another publication. The import of this chapter for the subject of increase and survival is expressed in two of its sentences. "Under conditions in which several diseases were completely eliminated, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, venereal infections, and the other infections which are indirectly the causes of many of the disorders of the cardiovascular-renal group, it might happen that the relative net increase of the two races would be quite different from what it now is. These diseases discriminate against the black man, but they do this because the black man lives in a social and economic environment largely dominated by the whites."

The presentation of facts is com-

prehensive and objective. Discussion is full, potential error meticulously indicated and conclusions are conservatively stated. Much material has been included which will improve the usefulness of the volume for the reader unacquainted with Negro problems but which would otherwise be unnecessary. Here and there conventional misconceptions of a former day appear, *e.g.*, "the mental ability of many of the intellectual leaders of the colored race could probably be traced to the more prominent whites of the South"; white women who married Negroes were generally already worthless.

The data used in this book would have permitted its appearance several years sooner. At the present time it whets interest in the approaching census of 1940. One finishes the volume with the impression that should the Government succeed in its present objectives for all Americans of adequate housing, a living wage and a public health program emphasizing maternal health and child care and the elimination of venereal disease and tuberculosis, the Negro's prospects for survival should be very bright indeed.

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